The Thoughtful Classroom Program

Becoming a Strategic Teacher:
Better Instruction, Deeper Learning, Higher Achievement

One of the greatest challenges facing today's school leaders is the challenge of raising the expertise of their teachers. We hear more calls for teacher effectiveness than ever before, and we are seeing that teacher effectiveness is becoming a significant part of the national discussion on education. Everybody agrees that what teachers do in the classroom matters deeply. A recent investigation into the practices of the world's top 25 school systems put it this way: "The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers" (Barber & Mourshed, 2007). In fact, a wide body of research shows that the single greatest factor affecting student achievement is classroom instruction. In one study, Mortimore & Sammons (1987) found that classroom instruction has more impact on student learning than any other factor—more important than the next six factors they studied combined. As McKinsey & Company concluded in their study of the world's best schools, "The only way to improve outcomes is to improve instruction."

Obviously, we all wish for our teachers to be more thoughtful and effective in designing and delivering instruction that raises student achievement. In The Thoughtful Classroom, we call these teachers *strategic teachers*, and for three reasons:

1. Strategic teachers have a repertoire of research-based instructional strategies at their disposal.
2. Strategic teachers understand how and when to use particular strategies in their classrooms. They can select strategies that support their objectives and adapt strategies to meet particular learning goals. In other words, their overall approach to instruction is strategic.
3. Strategic teachers understand that their fellow educators are their greatest resource. That's why strategic teachers seek out opportunities to work and learn with colleagues. It's also why strategic school leaders seek to develop a school culture that supports teachers as they work together to master new strategies and refine their practice. More than ever, administrators are being asked to play a larger role in building teachers' expertise because high-performing schools lead to the development of more strategic teachers.

Let's take a closer look at each of these reasons behind strategic teaching as separate elements.

Element One: Research-Based Instructional Strategies

In the book *The Strategic Teacher* (Silver, Strong, & Perini, 2007), we've collected 20 of the most reliable and flexible research-based strategies and organized them into four distinct styles of instruction: a **Mastery** style that emphasizes the development of student memory; an **Understanding** style that seeks to expand students' capacities to reason and explain; a **Self-Expressive** style that stimulates and nourishes students' imaginations and creativity; and an **Interpersonal** style that helps students find meaning in the relationships they forge as partners and team members, united in the act of learning.

Why such a premium on strategies? Because teachers need strategies if they are going to become experts. When strategies are used well, they work—plain and simple. The strategies in *The Strategic Teacher*, for example, are all based on solid research and over 35 years of classroom practice. But beyond that, strategies are the answer to so many questions and pressures that today's teachers face, questions like:

1. *How can I differentiate instruction so that more of my students succeed?* The answer is research-based strategies. Because different strategies highlight different styles of thinking, they can help teachers reach more students—especially those students who feel that their styles of thinking are ignored in school.
2. *I've got Common Core State Standards and state assessment tests staring me down. How can I help my students develop the skills they need to be successful?* Again research-based strategies are a good answer because strategies build core academic skills.
3. *How can I increase student engagement?* Research-based strategies, because they use what we call "motivational levers" like controversy, choice, competition, challenge, and curiosity to capture student interest and secure their commitment to learning.
4. *How can I deepen student understanding?* Research-based strategies, because we know from the research of Robert Sternberg (2006) that using multiple styles of teaching leads to greater retention, deeper comprehension, and higher achievement scores. Citing a number of studies involving students of different grade levels across a wide range of content areas, Sternberg reports that students in courses that emphasized different styles of instruction did better on both objective tests and performance assessments. Sternberg concludes that multi-style instruction raises achievement because it "enables students to capitalize on their strengths and to correct or to compensate for their weaknesses, encoding material in a variety of interesting ways" (pp. 33-34).

In short, strategies help teachers do their work better while, at the same time, helping students become better thinkers and learners.

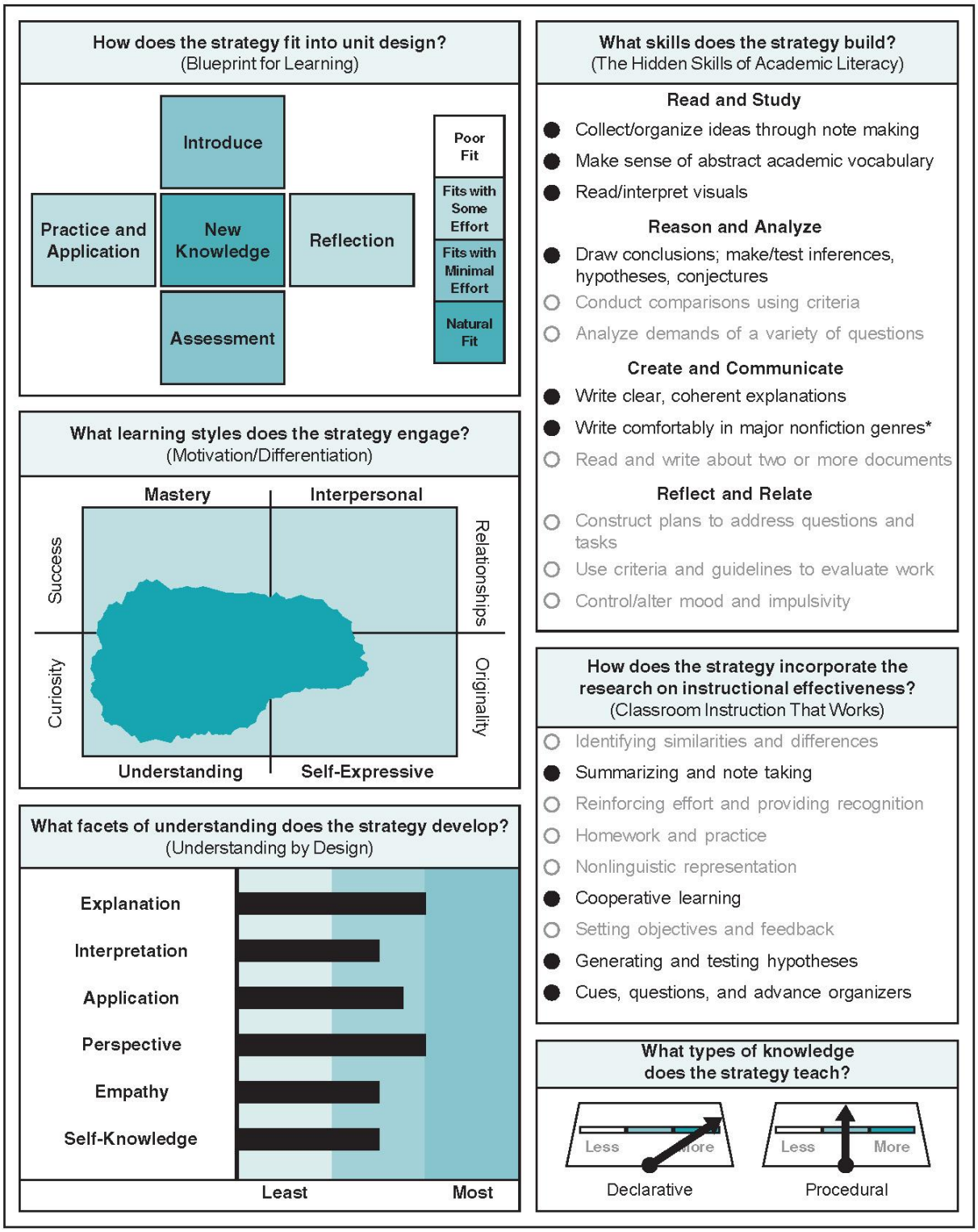
Element Two: Applying Strategies to the Right Classroom Situations

It's important to understand that knowing some strategies does not ensure teacher effectiveness. In fact, the same lines of research that give us our strategies also carry a warning. For example, a new analysis of teacher effectiveness by Peggy Schooling, Michael Toth, and Robert Marzano (2010) shows that simply using research-based strategies in the classroom does not guarantee that student learning will increase. In fact, the research shows that some teachers use research-based strategies and see negative results. Why?

One reason is that teachers may be using the wrong strategies at the wrong time. Because different strategies are suited to different types of lessons, applying a strategy without first aligning it to clear instructional outcomes can hinder student learning. In response, we developed the Strategic Dashboard, a simple one-page decision-making tool built off the findings of some of today's leading thinkers in education. Each of the 20 strategies in *The Strategic Teacher* comes with its own Strategic Dashboard in

order to make it easy for teachers to decide when a strategy is right for their particular objectives. (See Figure 1 for a sample Strategic Dashboard.)

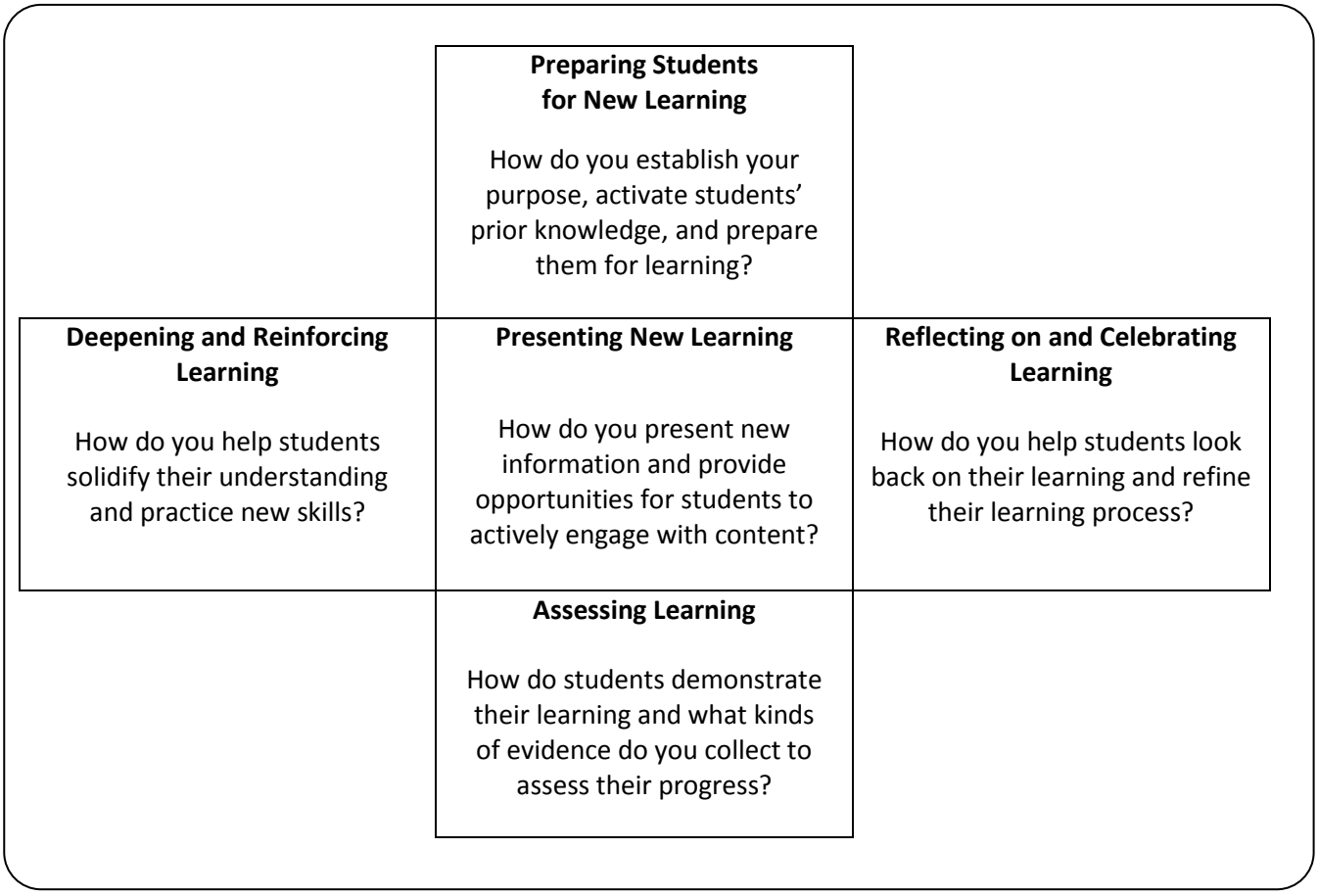
Figure 1: Reading for Meaning Dashboard



You'll see that the Strategic Dashboard helps teachers answer key questions related to their instructional goals. Using a dashboard, a teacher can quickly determine how the strategy can be used to to differentiate instruction and motivate different styles of learners; what skills, facets of understanding, and types of knowledge the strategy develops in students; and how the strategy is supported by research. You'll also notice that the top left section of the dashboard focuses specifically on instructional design. That's because strategic teachers see strategies as more than ways to cover specific content or build particular skills. Instead, strategic teachers take a longer view, integrating strategies into their larger lesson and unit designs.

By synthesizing the insights of the best lesson design models (Hunter, 1984; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005; Marzano, 2007) with what we've learned from teachers over the years, we've identified five questions that every teacher needs to answer when developing a lesson or unit. Figure 2 shows these five questions organized on an instructional design tool we call a unit blueprint.

Figure 2: A Unit Blueprint



We have found that helping teachers think about their overall instructional designs as a blueprint greatly accelerates their ability to align strategies to the bigger picture of student learning.

Element Three: Collaborative Learning and Support Structures

A second reason that research-based strategies may not improve learning has to do with a teacher's level of expertise. A teacher may apply a strategy to an appropriate classroom situation and the results may still disappoint if the teacher lacks the expertise to use the strategy correctly or well. But we must remember that developing expertise takes time and support. It is both foolish and unfair to expect new teachers to apply new strategies like experts.

To help teachers master new strategies and to help school leaders build a culture more conducive to the kind of professional learning that builds teachers' expertise, we've developed with ASCD a new kind of professional development tool called a Strategic Teacher PLC Guide. We designed these PLC Guides with some very specific and—frankly—very troubling research in mind: Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers (2002) have found that for most professional development initiatives, less that 10% of what teachers learn makes it into the classroom. Think about that: **less than 10%.** Think of all the time, resources, and dollars that schools put into professional development for a 10% return. Pretty scary, right? So, clearly, that's the bad news. Now here's the good news: Joyce and Showers go on to show that with the right kind of support system—one that encourages specific teacher behaviors—schools can reverse the percentages, from 10/90 to 90/10. In other words, we don't have to accept 10% implementation. We can change it to 90% implementation.

With this research in mind, we developed partnerships with over 75 schools. Our goal was to create a resource that would provide a clear structure and process for helping teachers master strategies and work collaboratively to raise the quality of instruction in their classrooms. Over a two-year period we piloted and refined several models, shaping them into the current PLC Guides. As a result, each PLC Guide now has a four-section structure that encourages precisely those teacher behaviors proven to lead to high levels of transfer to the classroom:

- Section 1 is a tutorial on the strategy. It encourages teachers to **reflect on their current practices** and **analyze and discuss model lessons**.
- Section 2 focuses on planning and encourages **collaborative analysis of lesson designs**, and the **development of a "critical friend" for planning and refining lessons**.
- Between Sections 2 and 3, teachers **implement their lessons in the classroom** and, if possible, invite their **critical friend to observe the lesson**.
- In Section 3, teachers **reflect on how their lesson worked in the classroom** and **provide each other with feedback** on how future lessons can be improved.
- In Section 4, teachers **analyze student work collaboratively** and **use that work to make further instructional decisions**.

In developing this four-phase model of professional learning, we've also been deliberate in addressing the four common flaws of professional development programs, which consistently hinder the development of teachers' expertise. These four common flaws, identified by the National Research Council (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000), are:

1. **Workshops that aren't "learner-centered**," or that simply require teachers to show up.
2. **No rationale or background**: "Teachers may simply be introduced to a new technique without being given the opportunity to understand why, when, or how it might be valuable to them" (p. 27).
3. **Disconnect from practice and feedback**: "In order for teachers to change their practices, they need opportunities to try things out in their classrooms and then receive feedback. Most professional development opportunities do not provide such feedback" (p. 27).
4. **Lack of support/little sense of community**: "Opportunities for continued contact and support as teachers incorporate new ideas into their teaching are limited" (p.27).

Piloting the Strategic Teacher PLC Guides: A Ten-District Case Study

Beginning in 2004, we worked with the Green River Regional Educational Cooperative (GRREC) in Southwestern Kentucky to increase teacher effectiveness by developing the three elements associated with strategic teaching. Specifically, our goals were to:

- increase teachers' repertoires of research-based instructional strategies;
- develop teachers' understanding of how to apply strategies to meet specific objectives and build meaningful lessons and units; and
- build learning clubs across schools and districts. Learning clubs are small groups of teachers who meet regularly to learn, plan, and refine strategies as a team. Learning clubs also analyze student work and use it to make instructional decisions.

This three-year initiative involved over 50 schools across ten districts. The model we developed with GRREC to achieve our goals on this large scale was a teacher-leadership model, which gave us greater leverages in creating change across the districts. We trained principals and two teacher-leaders from each school in how to use the PLC Guides to lead learning clubs, build teachers' repertoires of strategies, and help teachers refine their use of these strategies in the classroom. We also provided leadership training for both administrators and teacher-leaders.

The teacher-leaders then worked with ten teachers from their schools to form a site-based Instructional Leadership Team (ILT). In the second and third years of the initiative the schools' ILTs became responsible for conducting most of GRREC's professional development, using the PLC Guides to train and support over 2,000 teachers across the district (See Figure 3). For three years, this model served as GRREC's primary professional development initiative. Over that time, all ten districts saw gains on the state accountability index, with nine of the ten districts exceeding the state average and two of the districts more than doubling the state average. In the second year of the initiative, Kentucky's number one and number three districts showing the greatest gains on the state accountability index were part of this initiative. When compared against GRREC districts that did not participate in the initiative, participating districts fared better on average by more than 1.5 points on the state accountability index. Figure 4 summarizes the performances of the ten districts over the course of the initiative.

Figure 3: A "Leverage" Model for Improving Instruction

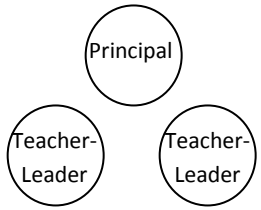
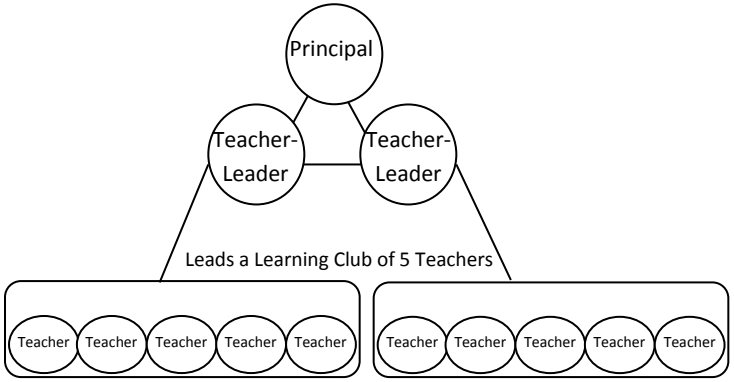
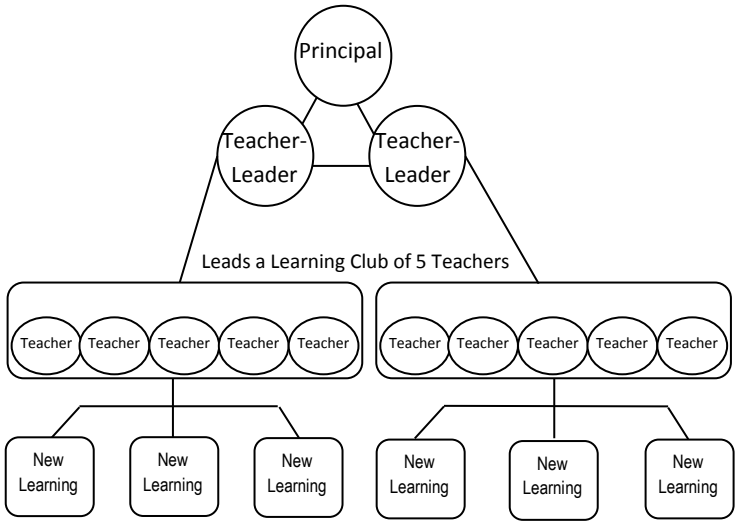
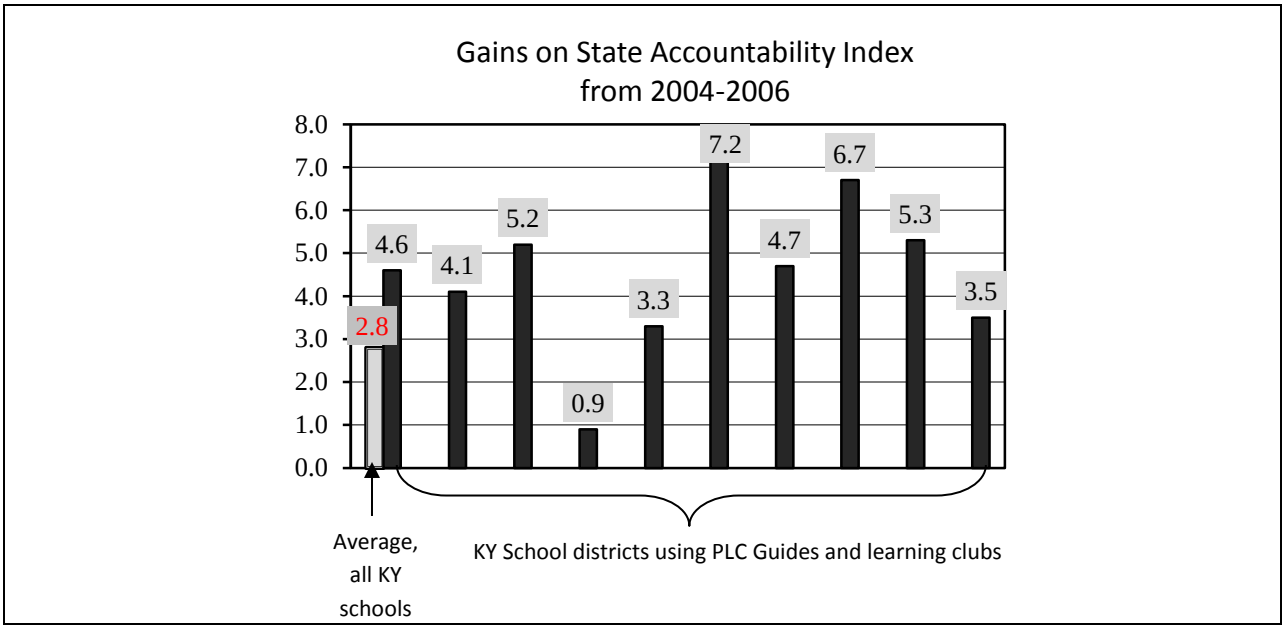
Each School's Core Team	Each School's Instructional Leadership Team	Expanding the Model to Create Leverage
		
The principal and two teacher-leaders from each school received leadership and instructional training.	In year one teacher-leaders trained ten teachers. The principal, teacher leaders, and trained teachers became each school's Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) and formed two learning clubs (LC), which used the Strategic Teacher PLC Guides to master new strategies.	In years two and three, the initiative expanded, as each school's ILT trained the other teachers in the school. Under the ILT's leadership, the school formed multiple new learning clubs, and used the PLC Guides to master new strategies. Each learning club learned at least two new strategies each year.

Figure 4: Performance of Participating GRREC Districts



Here is some of the feedback we received on the initiative:

- *Liz Storey, Executive Director of GRREC at the time of the initiative*: "Our three-year initiative is giving GRREC's schools the tools to close the achievement gap. I've never seen teachers more excited about their own professional growth."
- *Dale Brown, Superintendent of Warren County Schools, (one of the districts participating in the GRREC initiative at the time of the initiative)*: "We value this professional development so much that if we didn't have school funding for it, I'd take out a personal loan to get it into my district."
- *Gene Wilhoit, Kentucky Commissioner of Education at the time of the initiative*: "Dr. Harvey Silver and The Thoughtful Classroom Team have done a masterful job in guiding Kentucky educators to tie newly refined academic content standards to the key elements of an effective classroom. Evaluations from our Instructional Support Network confirm the real value of this very high quality professional development experience. This team has helped Kentucky educators understand how to address these standards meaningfully in their classrooms, and they are excited about the impact this will have on teaching and learning across our state."

Conclusion

We all know there is no magic bullet, no single solution to the challenge of enhancing teacher s' expertise. What we do know—and what the data from GRREC illustrates—is that administrators and school leaders can raise the expertise of their teachers and the achievement levels of their students by designing a professional development initiative focused on improving the quality of classroom instruction. We have found that such initiatives are most effective when they insist on highlighting three critical goals above all others:

- expanding teachers' repertoires of research-based strategies;
- developing teachers' ability to adapt strategies to meet specific needs and design meaningful lessons and units; and
- building collaborative support structures that allow teachers to learn together, analyze and refine their practices, and use student work to set instructional priorities.

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